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America's Mideast Malaise

Lebanese intelligence officials suspect but will not identify the Shiite fundamentalists in the Beirut area behind the truck-bombing of the U.S. Embassy, confirming growing U.S. impotence—matched by an alarming Soviet resurgence—in the Middle East.

Information obtained by Lebanese agents about the fourth major terrorist attack on U.S. installations in the Middle East is not being confided to the United States. Suspicious of U.S. policy makers, officials in the Beirut regime may fear U.S. retaliation would further damage Lebanon's status in the Arab world.

There is not the slightest taint of suspicion that any Lebanese official had prior knowledge of the attack, which killed two Americans. But resistance to confiding in Washington shows the depths to which trust in the United States has fallen in Lebanon since the collapse of Secretary of State George Shultz's well-intended effort to arrange simultaneous withdrawal of Israeli and Syrian troops.

In this mood of malaise, neither diplomats nor specialists in anti-American terror are willing to speculate publicly on where terrorists will attack next.

A good guess is one of the small Persian Gulf states such as Bahrain or the Arab Emirates, or even another stab at Kuwait. A slaughter of American diplomats at the U.S. Embassy in Kuwait last winter was barely foiled, largely by good luck.

The situation is symptomatic of America's Mideast malaise, deriving from policy decisions in Washington. The veto by the United States in the U.N. Security Council this month of a Lebanese-sponsored resolution condemning Israel's occupation conduct almost certainly helped trigger the terrorist attack in presumably secure Christian Beirut.

Seeking to avoid the new stigma of a veto, Shultz and top Mideast hands at State almost begged Lebanon to hold off offering the resolution. But the weak Lebanese government, faced with the grave deterioration of its southern regions under Israeli occupation, went ahead anyway.

Lebanese officials privately told the United States that Israel's refusal to soften its harsh regimen in occupied southern Lebanon made delay of the U.N. resolution impossible. They said they had no other choice with Lebanese families divided, commerce at a standstill and Shiite killings by the Israeli-run Southern Lebanon Army a common occurrence.

Loss of influence in the small country where the United States had exercised full sway ever since President Eisenhower landed troops there in 1958 is matched in reverse by Soviet movements throughout the Middle East. That's a situation Reagan administration officials prefer to play down—as when Kuwait was about to sign a multimillion-dollar weapons deal with the Soviets this past summer.

Robert C. McFarlane, the president's national security adviser, said he doubted that any such deal would actually be consummated. Despite McFarlane's reputation for prudence, he was proved wrong. Indeed, the Kuwait-Soviet arms deal has now entered a deeper phase, with the first-ever agreement to accept Soviet advisers and technicians to train Kuwaitis on their new Soviet arms.

In Egypt, the return of the Soviet ambassador to Cairo and the Egyptian envoy to Moscow marks a restoration of normal diplomatic relations that Israel, helped by the United States, is unable to persuade the Egyptians to duplicate. Egypt put its Israeli relations on hold, pulling its ambassador out of Tel Aviv after Israeli troops moved into Southern Lebanon.

Considering Egypt's importance in the Arab world, Soviet influence rises throughout the Middle East because of its closer ties with Cairo. The Kremlin's Mideast stock also is boosted by the new alliance between Morocco, America's closest North African Arab friend, and Libya, a hated enemy of Washington and an ally of Moscow.

In this framework, reluctance of Lebanese intelligence to confide in the U.S. government is chilling. It points to even colder days ahead in once warm relations between the United States and the Arabs, as Washington ever more builds Israel as its only ally in the region.

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